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Get to 100 and Life Actually Doesn't Feel so Bad

By PHYLLIS KORKKI



Louis Solomon, 99, shares a Bronx apartment with his son, Eric, who attributes his father's longevity in part to optimism.

MANY studies of very old people seem to boil down to this: trying to figure out what they ate, drank and did, so that other people can try to live that long, too. [Daniela S. Jopp](#), an assistant psychology professor at Fordham University, is more interested in how people actually feel once they approach 100.

Younger people can derive lessons from her findings, but beyond that Professor Jopp hopes her research can help the very old lead fulfilling, socially connected lives until the very end.

The New York Times

May 14, 2014

She sees her work as going beyond a study of demographic outliers. According to population projections, half of the people born after the year 2000 [will live to at least 100](#), she noted. At a certain point, achieving three digits will no longer be unusual.

There is a paradox in the desire to live longer, she said. Many people want to reach an advanced age, but they do not actually want to *be* that old, she said. Yes, it's seen as better than the alternative. But over all, "We have a very negative view of very old age," she said.

Her research gives cause for hope: It shows that once people approach 100, they tend to have a very positive attitude toward life. This is the case even though "they have on average between four and five illnesses, which are pretty disabling and hinder them from doing the things they want to do," Professor Jopp said. They still have goals, she said, and they are not ready to die just yet. They want to see how the Yankees fare next season or attend the wedding of a grandchild.

This attitude holds true across the socioeconomic spectrum, although having enough money to pay for one's medications is very important to well-being, she added.

In fact, people 95 and older report higher levels of satisfaction with life than those who are decades younger, Professor Jopp said. She speculates that people in their 60s and 70s have not yet fully adapted to their impairments, whereas the very old have reached a state of acceptance.

Professor Jopp's observations are based on [studies of people in Heidelberg, Germany](#), and a study she did of 119 very old New Yorkers chosen from voter registries and [nursing homes](#).

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She has found that in addition to being optimistic, the very old tend to be extroverted and to exhibit “self-efficacy,” meaning they report feeling in control of their lives. Most of the people in the New York study live within the community, many of them alone, and most greatly value retaining a sense of independence, she said.

[A study published in the journal Aging](#) in 2012 mirrored some of Professor Jopp’s findings, saying that the very old had positive attitudes and expressed their emotions openly. It also said that “centenarians have been reported to share particular personality traits including low neuroticism and high extraversion and conscientiousness.” The study added that some of these traits may be inherited.

Professor Jopp’s New York study was limited to people who could reliably answer questions about themselves. But it is “absolutely not the case” that the very old will inevitably suffer major cognitive decline, she said. The same limitation did not apply in the two Heidelberg studies, and about half of those subjects (a total of more than 180 people) had very little cognitive impairment, she said; a quarter of them had moderate impairment.

One of Professor Jopp’s New York research subjects, Rose Franzone of Brooklyn, who still lives in the house she shared with her husband, remains mentally sharp at 103. She has a tenant and takes care of her own finances, even playing the stock market. She also knits and crochets, and bakes cookies and makes chocolates.

There was nothing in her family history to suggest that Ms. Franzone would live past 100. Her father died at 67 and her mother at 73, and she outlived her four brothers. Ms. Franzone attributes her longevity to the Almighty. “I’m

The New York Times

May 14, 2014

Catholic, so that's what I believe. It's not my time."

Her husband died nine years ago, and they had no children. It is her many friends who help her stay active and optimistic, she said. She is in fairly good health, but she can no longer drive. Her friends take her shopping and drive her to various social events. Staying active, she said, "makes a difference as to how you accept life."

Research by Professor Jopp and many others stresses the importance of maintaining strong social networks as we age. Louis Solomon, 99, another participant in her study, is adamant about how to age successfully: Make a lot of friends, and make sure some of them are younger so you don't outlive them all.

Several members of Mr. Solomon's long-running Saturday night poker group have now died. His wife died more than 20 years ago. More than a year after her death, he found a female companion, and after 15 years, she too died. His life is a series of losses, but like Ms. Franzone, he describes himself as a happy person. His vision is poor and he has two [hearing aids](#). He can no longer drive, "but the fact that I'm ambulatory — that helps," he said.

Like Ms. Franzone, Mr. Solomon maintains an active life. He enjoys reading thrillers (Nelson DeMille and Robert Ludlum are among his favorite authors) and he has a computer so he can surf the Internet. He grows plants and flowers from seed in little pots that line his bedroom window.

Of the losses he has suffered and his own inevitable death, he says: "It's devastating when you think about it, but it's natural. You have to accept that you're not going to live forever. You take it in stride and don't let it get you down."

The New York Times

May 14, 2014

He lives with his son, Eric, in the Riverdale section of the Bronx and is grateful to have family to care for him. Recently he was at a family gathering where four generations of his family were together at one time.

Eric Solomon, 53, says his father's lifelong optimism has contributed to his longevity. His dietary habits do not appear to have been a factor. "He didn't eat any vegetables until we were living together, and he eats ice cream every day," Eric Solomon said.

Because of longer life expectancies, a new phenomenon is emerging, Professor Jopp said: Some parents and children are experiencing old age together. On the one hand, children in their late 70s and 80s say they are happy their parents are still alive, she said. But it can also be a challenge dealing with a very old parent's health problems while facing one's own aging-related impairments, she said. Less commonly, the reverse is also true — where an older parent continues to care for an aging, disabled child, and may feel the will to live longer for that reason, she said.

Professor Jopp says she hopes her research will help uncover ways to offer better social services for the very old. And she hopes it will open up new avenues for the very old to pass along their insights and knowledge to others. As she puts it: "They have a lot to share — and to contribute to society."